
MERCHANT NAVY NEWS

REPORT FROM ASHFORD

by Bernard Wright

As mentioned briefly in the last issue, a test steaming following the hydraulic test took place on the weekend of the 24th/25th June. In fact the fun and games started the week before with the coaling exercise. With the loco being in the shed, and the coal dumped outside, it meant that not only did the "black diamonds" have to be lifted some twelve feet or so vertically into the tender, but also that they had to be transported over a distance of about one hundred yards in wheel barrows. Moving close on five tons (or £119.00 worth) of coal by hand kept a team of members "amused" for most of the day.

On the actual weekend of the test several members made their way to Ashford on the Friday night, arriving between nine and ten p.m. The first job was to manhandle the loco from inside the shed to a position outside. After much sweating and swearing we at last got her rolling, only to come to a halt in a position with the tender blocking the shed doors. Try as we might we could not move her, until after around half an hours work with pinch bars we were clear, and the doors could be closed. Whilst all the action was taking place Terry Potter, ex Nine Elms, had the fire started, and after sorting out the various two-hour shifts to keep an eye on things, the time was about one a.m. when we retired to the coach, and to our sleeping bags.

By 7 a.m. the Guildford contingent had arrived, having started out at 5 a.m., and Bill Brown, sporting a new set of overalls (Mrs. Brown having decided that the previous pair had seen better days) and backed by his willing helpers, began to get to grips with the various fitting jobs. Later in the day Malcolm Collop (Bournemouth) and Bert Hooker (Nine Elms) put in an appearance, and somewhere around three p.m. the loco was out of the hands of the fitters and ambling up and down the yard, but not before a certain amount of P. Way work had been done to the running road.

After the June steaming a job that had been niggling us for years was tackled most successfully by John Bellamy and Norman Payne. This involved getting some of the dents and buckles out of the ashpan hoppers, and in an optimistic mood John brought down some hydraulic equipment used for straightening out bent Mini's (not Merchants) from his garage. With Norman performing on the welding torch as well, they soon achieved quite spectacular results. Norman then took down all the damping gear, i.e. doors and rodding, and made a nice job replacing or rebuilding the various parts.

In August we decided on steaming the engine for the Open Day on the 6th, once again lighting up early on the Saturday morning. Footplate members on duty for the weekend included Fred Prickett, Bert Hooker, Terry Potter, Malcolm Collop, and Jim Moon (Faversham). The loco gave footplate rides from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and nearly two hundred fare paying passengers were carried, but although we took £34.00, this did not pay for the coal used over the weekend. Unfortunately the coal, reputed to be Welsh steam by the merchant, left a lot to be desired. In fact judging by the unprintable comments of the footplate staff we could almost make out a case for the Trades Description Act. Perhaps with a consignment of good coal we can achieve better revenue figures. An added attraction on this particular day was a film show put on by Bob Todd, supported by John Harvey, in the Bulleid coach owned by four members of the Society. The show was free, but a donation box was displayed and about £3.00 was collected during the afternoon. Also Robin Bunce looked after the Sales stand for the day, and had a reasonable income at the end of the proceedings.



"Clan Line" in steam at Ashford 24/6/72.

Photo : J. Harvey.

On Wednesday, 23rd August we supported the Ashford works "Open Day" in aid of the Southern Railway Orphanage at Woking. With just a few days notice John Bellamy rustled up a posse, who by fair means or foul managed to get time off mid-week.

With John was Tim Robbins, Steve Austin, John Harvey, and Terry Potter. They went down on the Monday evening, spruced the loco up on the Tuesday, and, according to reports, were towed out on to the main line through Ashford Station and back into the Works on Wednesday morning. Manning the Sales stand was Alec Swain and Mrs. Eileen Bellamy who, rumour has it, stayed the previous night in the coach (plucky girl!). The team was completed in the afternoon by the arrival of the Hon. Sec., Tony Clare. From all accounts the loco caused quite a stir, many people asking from what part of the world the loco had come, not realising that for the last year it had been in a shed about three hundred yards from the Works, on the other side of the Dover main line. In the early hours of Thursday morning the loco was towed back to the South Eastern Steam Centre, and by 5 a.m. she was back in her stall.

For some time now we have been hoping to get a meeting between the fitting staff, and some of the senior footplate "boys," to chat over various problems and ideas regarding getting the loco in tip top shape for any future eventualities. Due to shift work, etc., it was a task easier said than done, but we did manage it on the occasion of the September Open Day, combining a little revenue earning activity in the afternoon with the meeting in the morning. Bill Brown (ex Guildford M.P.D.), Jack Banks, Roger Booker (ex Stratford works), F. Lewer (Motive Power Dept., Brighton), George Stanton (Ashford Works), Fred Prickett, Bert Hooker, Tony Clare, Malcolm Hogg, and myself attended.

After a meeting in the running shed the loco was backed over a pit, and the experts spent some time prodding, measuring, airing views, and after a time they all trooped out from underneath, agreeing on what should, or shouldn't be done. Just before 1 p.m. the loco was taken over to the relief road where she tried to recuperate some of the cost of the coal. Taking it in turns on the footplate were Fred Prickett, Malcolm Collop, Jim Moon, Ted Crawforth (Exmouth Jc), and the latest recruit in this department, Ernie Hewitt, who joined the Southern Railway in 1929 at Ramsgate, and went on to Stewarts Lane and Ashford M.P.D's. (To date we have eighteen drivers and firemen who have joined the Society).

The net result of these steamings confirms our fears that a loco with a 48 sq. ft. firebox will be hard pressed to pay for itself, fuel-wise, with coal priced at over £20.00 per ton. Admitted we don't fill the cab as they do at some other centres, because we feel that the public, having paid their money, should at least be able to see some thing, and not be packed in like sardines. Our footplate staff also give a short talk explaining the various controls and fittings, besides answering questions, a fact that has been appreciated by many customers. One amusing incident has come out of these

weekends—after visiting the local cafe on Saturday evenings for a meal we have found out that Malcolm Collop is something of a fish addict. Much to the consternation of the waitress Malcolm orders FOUR large pieces of fish with his chips, and with half a shoal waiting on a side plate he happily tucks away at these refugees from the cod war!

The steamings have in many ways somewhat curtailed work on the loco itself due to the fact that besides the actual steaming weekend, the week before is taken up with preparation, whilst the following one is devoted to clearing up. Whilst on this subject, I'm afraid that while we get a lot of support when the loco is in steam, we are a little thin on the ground trying to manage the jobs beforehand, plus the fact that clearing up afterwards seems to attract less people. I can assure readers that the one or two people faced with the clearing up of the coaches, etc., disposing of empty milk and lemonade bottles (plus old soup tins just in the first stages of growing a crop of penicillin) feel that its not the ideal way to spend a Sunday.

Work is still going on underneath the South Western coach, and a certain amount of clearing up has taken place around the stores and yard, so much so that Steve Austin is quite concerned that the Society's initials M.N.L.P.S. stand for Moving Numerous Large Pieces of Scrap! Besides the activities at Ashford itself there has been a continuous round of meetings with various people and departments of British Rail, solicitors, and other societies, plus extra committee meetings to sift and correlate all the relevant information needed to get a 140 ton machine in running order—in a nutshell, a hectic three months.

Further afield, we have also shown the Society film at several places during the last year including the Stour Valley Preservation Society at Bishops Stortford, B.R. Staff Association at Kings Cross, Historical Model Railway Society at Keen House, Brooklands Railway Society at Weybridge, Epsom and Ewell M.R.C. at Ewell, and the Association of British Railway Modellers of North America in Toronto, Canada!

In closing I would like to remind members that we can still find homes for the following items:—nails, screws, nuts and bolts (especially Whitworth), fire hoses, folding steps and ladders, firewood, and rags. We regret to report that Mr. W. Vincent, boiler inspector of the Cornhill Insurance Co., who has been most kind and helpful to us over the past year, was involved in a serious road accident with his family whilst on holiday on Cornwall. I am sure that all members will join with us in wishing him and his family a speedy recovery.

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